What is DARVO?

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Definition of DARVO

DARVO refers to a reaction perpetrators of wrong doing, particularly sexual offenders, may display in response to being held accountable for their behavior. DARVO stands for "Deny, Attack, and Reverse Victim and Offender." The perpetrator or offender may Deny the behavior, Attack the individual doing the confronting, and Reverse the roles of Victim and Offender such that the perpetrator assumes the victim role and turns the true victim -- or the whistle blower -- into an alleged offender. This occurs, for instance, when an actually guilty perpetrator assumes the role of "falsely accused" and attacks the accuser's credibility and blames the accuser of being the perpetrator of a false accusation.

Institutional DARVO occurs when the DARVO is committed by an institution (or with institutional complicity) as when police charge rape victims with lying. Institutional DARVO is a pernicious form of institutional betrayal.

Anti-DARVO refers to both ways to reduce the negative impact of DARVO and also to teaching more constructive responses to allegations.

NEW! New DARVO research

Plenary Address

- Freyd, J.J. (2023, April). What do we know about DARVO, Institutional DARVO, and Anti-DARVO? Plenary address at the 40th annual meeting of the International Society for the Study of Trauma and Dissociation, Louisville, Kentucky, 15-17 April 2023.

Posters

- Harsey, S. & Freyd, J.J. (2023, April). DARVO and the Dark Triad: Associations between DARVO use and narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy. Poster presentation at the 40th annual meeting of the International Society for the Study of Trauma and Dissociation, Louisville, Kentucky, 15-17 April 2023.

- Harsey, S. J., & Freyd, J. J. (2023). Deny, Attack, Reverse Victim and Offender: Are DARVO responses associated with culpability? Poster at the American Psychological Association 2023 Convention, Washington, DC, 3-5 August 2023.

NEW! DARVO, Defamation Lawsuits, and the Prosecution of Women Reporting Rape

DARVO & Defamation

- Harsey, S. & Freyd, J.J. (2022) Defamation and DARVO [Editorial]. *Journal of Trauma & Dissociation,* **23,** 481-489, DOI: 10.1080/15299732.2022.2111510 (free access)

  From Defamation and DARVO:

  Defamation lawsuits targeting abuse survivors tick all the DARVO boxes: by suing for defamation, those accused of abuse are collectively denying they are guilty of their behavior while asserting that any claims made against them are false (in most cases, individuals cannot be defamed by true statements). Alleged perpetrators who sue alleged victims for defamation often attack the mental competence and motivations of the defendant in the defamation lawsuit. Moreover, defamation lawsuits position the plaintiffs – i.e., the abusers – as victims harmed by libel or slander. This is the three-pronged DARVO response – deny, attack, reverse victim and offender – packaged in a lawsuit intended to intimidate, silence, and punish victims.

DARVO & Prosecution

- Harsey, S. & Freyd, J.J. (2022) Deny, Attack, Blame: The Prosecution of Women Reporting Rape, *MsMagazine.com*, 28 November 2022.

  From The Prosecution of Women Reporting Rape

  In some cases in which rape victims are prosecuted after reporting their assaults, criminal justice systems commit a particularly egregious form of institutional betrayal by engaging in institutional "DARVO"—an acronym for Deny, Attack, Reverse Victim and Offender.

Theory & Empirical Research - Peer-Reviewed

Concept: DARVO was introduced in this peer-reviewed article:

- Freyd, J.J. (1997) Violations of power, adaptive blindness, and betrayal trauma theory. *Feminism & Psychology,* 7, 22-32.

Additional articles developed aspects of the relationship between DARVO, grooming, and betrayal trauma theory. (See section History of term on this page.)

Empirical research is more recent.

Peer-reviewed research: DARVO and Self-Blame (Harsey, Zurbriggen & Freyd, 2017)

In a 2017 peer-reviewed open-access research study, Perpetrator Responses to Victim Confrontation: DARVO and Victim Self-Blame, Harsey, Zurbriggen, & Freyd reported that: "(1) DARVO was commonly used by individuals who were confronted; (2) women were more likely to be exposed to DARVO than men during

confrontations; (3) the three components of DARVO were positively correlated, supporting the theoretical construction of DARVO; and (4) higher levels of exposure to DARVO during a confrontation were associated with increased perceptions of self-blame among the confronters. These results provide evidence for the existence of DARVO as a perpetrator strategy and establish a relationship between DARVO exposure and feelings of self-blame. Exploring DARVO aids in understanding how perpetrators are able to enforce victims' silence through the mechanism of self-blame."

- Harsey, S., Zurbriggen, E., & Freyd, J.J. (2017 -- published Open Access). Perpetrator Responses to Victim Confrontation: DARVO and Victim Self-Blame. *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment, & Trauma,* 26, 644-663.

Peer-reviewed research: Research: DARVO's impact on third parties and Anti-DARVO (Harsey & Freyd, 2020)

Sarah Harsey and I completed several experiments (Harsey & Freyd, 2020). In one experiment we presented participants with accounts of abuse followed by a DARVO response versus a control response. We found exposure to the DARVO response was associated with less belief of the victim and more blame of the victim. In another experiment in the same report Sarah Harsey and I examined whether learning about DARVO could mitigate its effects on individuals' perceptions of perpetrators and victims. DARVO-educated participants (compared with control) rated the perpetrator as less believable. While much more research is needed, these results suggest that DARVO is an effective strategy to discredit victims but that the power of the strategy can be mitigated by education.

- Harsey, S. & Freyd, J.J. (2020). Deny, Attack, and Reverse Victim and Offender (DARVO): What is the influence on perceived perpetrator and victim credibility? *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment, & Trauma, **29**,* 897-916.

Peer-reviewed research: Research: DARVO and college women's contact with their perpetrators after sexual assault (Rosenthal & Freyd, 2022)

This study explores the experiences of 89 women who were sexually assaulted during college, asking to what extent they experience continued exposure to their perpetrators, whether such contact includes patterns characteristic of DARVO, and how they perceive such contact. Most participants experienced some contact with their perpetrator after their assault, and nearly half indicated experiencing DARVO tactics from their perpetrator.

- Rosenthal, M. N. & Freyd, J.J. (2022). From DARVO to Distress: College women's contact with their perpetrators after sexual assault. *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment, & Trauma,* **31**, 459-477. https://doi.org/10.1080/10926771.2022.2055512

Peer-reviewed research: The Influence of DARVO and Insincere Apologies on Perceptions of Sexual Assault (Harsey & Freyd, in press)

This study measured the influence of DARVO and another manipulative tactic – insincere perpetrator apologies – on observers' judgments of a victim and perpetrator in a fictional sexual violence scenario. Results were similar to Harsey & Freyd (2020) regarding the influence of DARVO while insincere apologies had minimal impact on ratings. By promoting distrust in victims and less punitive views of perpetrators, DARVO might contribute to rape-supporting outcomes like victim blaming, greater victim distress, and low rates of rape reporting and perpetrator prosecution.

- Harsey, S. & Freyd, J.J. (2023). The Influence of Deny, Attack, Reverse Victim and Offender and Insincere Apologies on Perceptions of Sexual Assault. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*. Vol. 38(17-18) 9985-10008. DOI: 10.1177/08862605231169751

DARVO Measurement Instruments

- DARVO Measures

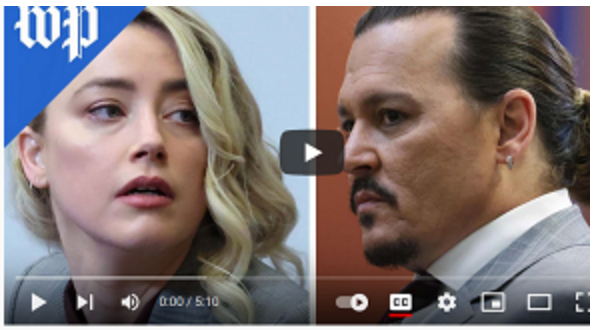
DARVO in the News (Selected Examples)

Podcasts:

- Listen Jennifer Freyd Kevin Webb Institutional Trauma Betrayal and Courage by Resa Lewis, Podcast: *The Visible Voices*, 10 February 2022.
- Listen Betrayal, betrayal trauma, & DARVO: Promoting individual & collective healing by Melissa Ming Foynes, *Podcast: The Science & Soul of Living Well,* 7 May 2021.
- Listen DARVO and Institutional Courage, Guest Jennifer Freyd , Host Kelly Leonard, The Second City Works *Getting to Yes, And*. . . Podcast, Episode 209, 3 March 2020.
- Listen Sexual Violence & Institutional Courage - Jennifer Freyd**:** Host John Markoff speaks with Dr. Freyd about her career from developing betrayal trauma theory to DARVO and institutional betrayal to her current work supporting institutional courage, *Human Centered,* 4 December 2019.
- Listen Jennifer Freyd discussing DARVO (Deny, Attack, Reverse Victim and Offender) and a better way to respond (6 minutes): Podcast: How to spot a pattern of denials in the #MeToo movement, *CBC Radio*, 26 October 2018.
- Listen Here's What a Backlash Against #MeToo Might Look Like, by by Lesley McClurg, *KQED Future of You*, 14 December 2017.
- Listen "Fresh Meat" – Stories from Sexual Harassment's Front Lines, by Michael Shulder, *Wavemaker* (podcast), 13 December 2017.

Videos:

- *South Park 90-second* DARVO Explainer, 7 November 2019
- .First woman to accuse Kavanaugh of assault faces backlash by Rosiland Jordan, *Al Jazeera English,* 27 September 2018. (2.5 min video includes Jennifer Freyd discussing DARVO)
- .Ashley Judd on deciding to come forward with Weinstein allegations, by Diane Sawyer, abc News, 26 October 2017 (DARVO discussed at 5:35).
- Interview of Jennifer Freyd about DARVO by Parham Ghobadi, *60 Minutes* on *BBC Persia*, 23 May 2021.
- The impact of Amber Heard's testimony by Allie Caren, *The Washington Post*, 27 May 2022.
- Interview with Jennifer Freyd about DARVO, *NBC Now Tonight*, 3 June 2022.



Unpacking the trauma in Amber Heard's testimony

4,791 views May 28, 2022 Johnny Depp's defamation trial against ex-wife Amber Heard ended on May 27 after six weeks. Jennifer Freyd, an expert in the psychology of sexual violence, discusses the impact of Heard's testimony.

In print and on-line (selected):

- Who's Really the Victim Here? It's time to end DARVO behavior in the healthcare workplace by Resa E. Lewiss, David G. Smith, Shikha Jain, W. Brad Johnson, and Jennifer J. Freyd, *MedPage Today*, 2 June 2022.
- Why did the Depp-Heard libel outcomes differ in the US and UK? by Rajeev Syal, *The Guardian*, 2 June 2022.
- Depp v. Heard: How to Tell Who's Engaging in DARVO Tactics by Emma Nolan, *Newsweek,* 27 May 2022.
- How Do We Know When To Believe Abuse Claims? Understanding DARVO In Johnny Depp V. Amber Heard by Nia Tipton, *YourTango*, 27 May 2022.
- Experts Can't Agree on Who's the True DARVO Victim in Depp v. Heard by Emma Nolan, *Newsweek*, 13 May 2022.
- Husband Ripped for Accusing Wife of 'Stealing' Money for Gift She Got Him by Nick Mordowanec, *Newsweek*, 2 May 2022.
- Johnny Depp, Amber Heard, and their $50 million defamation suit explained by Constance Grady, *Vox*, 4 May 2022.
- 'It must be really sad to be him': Accusers come to terms with life after Andrew Cuomo by Anna Gronewold, *Politico*, 11 April 2022.
- China's Propaganda DARVO Diagnosis, by Phelim Kine, *POLITICO China Watcher*, 16 December 2021.
- You've been DARVOed and you don't even know it, by Cynthia Vialle-Giancotti, *Gender News, Clayman Institute for Gender Research, Stanford University*, 13 December 2021.
- What is 'DARVO' and how is it used against survivors of violence? by Nicola Heath, *SBS,* Australia, 5 May 2021.
- How to take criticism and apologise on the internet by Justin Myers, *British GQ*, 29 April 2021.
- A guide to DARVO, the gaslighting response people give when they're called out for bad behavior by Ellen Scott, *Metro* (UK), 13 June 2020.

- Try not to roll your eyes at Matt Lauer's new arm tattoo by Christi Carras, *Los Angeles Times,* 21 May 2020.
- Matt Lauer responds to rape allegation from Ronan Farrow's 'Catch & Kill' by Brian Stelter, *CNN Business*, 20 May 2020.
- Matt Lauer writes scathing op-ed saying Ronan Farrow is 'manipulative' by Lauren Fruen, *Daily Mail*, 20 May 2020.
- Matt Lauer Debuts Arm Tattoo With 'Hatred' Quote After Lashing Out at Ronan Farrow in Op-Ed by Nicholas Hautman, *Us Weekly*, 20 May 2020.
- Brooke Nevils, Ronan Farrow respond to Matt Lauer accusations by Alex Heigl, *Page Six*, 19 May 2020.
- She Said, He Sued - How libel law is being turned against MeToo accusers by Madison Pauly, *Mother Jones*, 10 February 2020 (for March/April 2020 print issue).
- Harvey Weinstein Says He's the Real Victim by Madelyn Chung, *Flare*, 21 January 2020.
- 'South Park' Targets Trump and 'Treasonous Pig' Rudy Giuliani by Warner Todd Huston, *Breitbart*, 7 November 2019. (Reporting on *South Park* explaining DARVO.)
- Why Men Like R. Kelly Melt Down by Rose Minutaglio, *Elle*, 8 March 2019.
- R. Kelly's CBS meltdown has a name, says researcher: 'That's DARVO' by Cindy Dampier, *Chicago Tribune*, 7 March 2019.
- R. Kelly Played the Victim—And It's a Tactic We've Seen Before by Ishani Nath, *Flare*, 6 March 2019.
- Kavanaugh's opening remarks are a master class in a common sexual abuser defense tactic by Wagatwe Wanjuki, *Daily Kos,* 27 September 2018.
- Brett Kavanaugh Plays The Victim by Emily Peck, *Huffington Post*, 27 September 2018.
- Kavanaugh Shows the Disgusting Underbelly of America's Elite Schools by Susan Zalkind, *Vice*, 24 September 2018.
- Brett Kavanaugh accuser Christine Blasey Ford faces chorus of doubt, even after #MeToo by Cara Kelly and Sean Rossman, *USA Today*, 20 September 2018.
- Kavanaugh's accuser faces a familiar pattern: Deny, attack and reverse, *USA Today*, 19 September 2018.
- Bill Clinton Deployed A Tactic Used By Trump In Interview About Monica Lewinsky by Emily Peck, *Huffington Post*, 4 June 2018.
- Ashley Judd says women and companies need to learn the acronym DARVO, so they can disrupt it by Lila MacLellan, *Quartz*, 1 May 2018.
- Trump's DARVO defense of harassment accusations. by Louise Fitzgerald and Jennifer Freyd, *The Boston Globe*, 20 December 2017.
- Ashley Judd Is Just Getting Started by Adam Grant, *Esquire*, 11 Dec 2017.
- Amplify: Creating real change in the wake of #Metoo by Hannah Sung, *Globe and Mail Newsletter*, 8 December 2017.
- Ashley Judd on Why She Spoke Out About Weinstein: "It Was the Right Thing to Do" by Chris Gardner, *Hollywood Reporter,* 6 December 2017.
- How Sex Perps Use Deny, Attack, and Reverse by Sarah Harsey, *Nautilus Blog*, 27 November 2017.
- Ashley Judd Describes Harvey Weinstein Campaign To "Deny, Attack, Reverse Order Of Offender And Victim", by Lisa de Moraes, Deadline, 26 October 2017.
- Ashley Judd Escaped Weinstein By Making 'Deal' With Him, *Johnjay and Rich*, 26 October 2017.
- Ashley Judd on Her Decision to Speak Out Against Harvey Weinstein, *Extra TV*, 26 October 2017.

DARVO Illustrated:

Public events have been remarkably illustrative of the pattern we see in DARVO. From some of my tweets about this, referencing a *New York Times* article:

- "None of this ever took place" -- the Deny of **#DARVO** (1 of 3)
- "You are a disgusting human being," the Attack of **#DARVO** (2 of 3)
- "making up the allegations to hurt him" -- Reverse Victim & Offender of **#DARVO** (3 of 3)

And strikingly: "Trump on sex assault allegations: 'I am a victim'" (CNN reports)

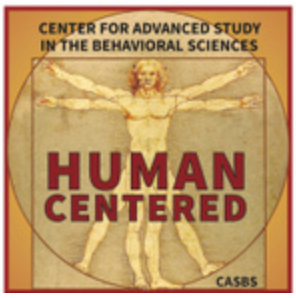
For more see: Fitzgerald, L.F. & Freyd, J.J. (2017) Trump's DARVO defense of harassment accusations. *The Boston Globe*, 20 December 2017.

Disclaimers

- **State of Empirical Evidence:** DARVO as a concept was based on observation and analysis. The systematic empirical research testing the coherence or frequency of DARVO is now emerging. See specific publications listed above in the section on Empirical Research. More research is needed.
- **Other Terms in Use:** Other observers have likely noted aspects of the same phenomena and related phenomena using different terms; the author has been informed that some people have found the term DARVO a helpful mnemonic and organizing concept.
- **More Research is Needed:** DARVO is offered as a potentially memorable and useful term for anticipating the behavior of perpetrators when held accountable, and for making sense of responses that may otherwise be confusing (particularly when victim and offender get reversed). Based on observation and analysis, the author hypothesizes that some sorts of denials and reactions such as DARVO are more likely when the perpetrator is guilty than innocent (Freyd, 1997). Additional research is needed. In the meantime we have indication, based on the research completed to date, that DARVO has deleterious impact on the credibility and well-being of victims exposed to it.

History of Terminology & Writings about DARVO

Jennifer Freyd introduced the term "DARVO" near the end of a 1997 publication about her primary research focus, "betrayal trauma theory." (For more on betrayal trauma theory, see http://pages.uoregon.edu/dynamic/jjf/defineBT.html.)

Podcast: Sexual Violence & Institutional Courage	
	Listen In this **Podcast: Sexual Violence & Institutional Courage - Jennifer Freyd**, Host John Markoff speaks with Dr. Freyd about her career of groundbreaking research, from developing betrayal trauma theory to current work supporting institutional courage. In the podcast Freyd also discusses what inspired her to develop the concept of DARVO.

The reference for the 1997 article introducing the term is:

Freyd, J.J. (1997) Violations of power, adaptive blindness, and betrayal trauma theory. *Feminism & Psychology,* 7, 22-32.

In that paper Freyd explained that DARVO responses may be effective for perpetrators. "...I have observed that actual abusers threaten, bully and make a nightmare for anyone who holds them accountable or asks them to change their abusive behavior. This attack, intended to chill and terrify, typically includes threats of

law suits, overt and covert attacks on the whistle-blower's credibility, and so on..... [T]he offender rapidly creates the impression that the abuser is the wronged one, while the victim or concerned observer is the offender. Figure and ground are completely reversed... The offender is on the offense and the person attempting to hold the offender accountable is put on the defense." (Freyd, 1997, p 29-30)

These ideas were further developed in an article by Veldhuis and Freyd (1999):

> Veldhuis, C. B., & Freyd, J. J. (1999). Groomed for silence, groomed for betrayal. In M. Rivera (Ed.), *Fragment by Fragment: Feminist Perspectives on Memory and Child Sexual Abuse* (pp. 253-282). Charlottetown, PEI Canada: Gynergy Books.

In the 1999 article Veldhuis and Freyd explore the separate components of DARVO, and they also note a connection between DARVO and "betrayal blindness," a concept from betrayal trauma theory (Freyd, 1996).

> "By denying, attacking and reversing perpetrators into victims, reality gets even more confusing and unspeakable for the real victim. .... These perpetrator reactions increase the need for betrayal blindness. If the victim does speak out and gets this level of attack, she quickly gets the idea that silence is safer." (Veldhuis & Freyd, 1999. p 274).

Since then the concept of DARVO has appeared in various writings, including our book *Blind to Betrayal* (Freyd & Birrell, 2013).

	Freyd, J.J.& Birrell, P.J. (2013). *Blind to Betrayal.* John Wiley & Sons.

In *Blind to Betrayal* we urge institutions to ***cherish the whistle blower*** (see p. 173) and we offer suggestions for specific steps institutions can take to prevent and repair institutional betrayal. In *Blind to Betrayal* we also talk about institutional denial which plays such a crucial role in institutional betrayal. DARVO is a particularly pernicious form of denial (see p 119 of *Blind to Betrayal*).

The first empirical research reports specifically testing the concept of DARVO are recently published (Harsey, Zurbriggen, & Freyd, 2017; Harsey & Freyd, 2020; Rosenthal & Freyd, 2022). See more about the research publications in the section on Empirical Research.

Two Common Types of Denial

Two common forms of perpetrator (or bystander) denial are:

1. *It didn't happen* (an instance) or *It rarely happens* (a type of event)
2. *It wasn't harmful*

Put together they can take the form: "It didn't happen, but if it did, it wasn't that bad" or "It rarely happens, but when it does it isn't harmful." The two claims both serve to deny, but they depend upon different sorts of evidence. They may both be true, but they are sometimes somewhat suspicious when claimed simultaneously (or by the same person at different times), as for instance can occur in response to allegations of rape or child sexual abuse (see Cheit & Freyd, 2005).

FAQs

How do I respond well to disclosure?

> See our compassionate listening tips
>
> And see: Freyd, J.J. (2017). How to Listen When Someone You Know Discloses Sexual Harassment or Assault. *PI, the American Psychological Association, Public Interest Blog*, 22 November 2017.

How do I get the articles mentioned on this page?

> For full text links and additional books, articles, and presentations on betrayal trauma theory see: http://pages.uoregon.edu/dynamic/jjf/trauma.html.

What are some local pages related to this one?

- Institutional Betrayal and Institutional Courage
- What is a Betrayal Trauma? What is Betrayal Trauma Theory?

How do I cite this page?

> Freyd, J.J. ([*current year*]). *What is DARVO?* Retrieved [*today's date*] from http://pages.uoregon.edu/dynamic/jjf/defineDARVO.html.

Also See

- Institutional Betrayal and Institutional Courage
- Tips: Be a Good Listener
- Freyd Dynamics Lab Home Page
- The Center for Institutional Courage
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